

On the Map: Comments on Stuart Elden's Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History

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References to Heidegger appear only infrequently in Foucault's work. Yet Heidegger is there both at the beginning of Foucault's career – in the context of Foucault's introduction to Ludwig Binswanger's Dreams and Existence¹ – and also towards the end – in a well-known late interview in which he tells us that, for him, "Heidegger was always... the essential philosopher".² The question of the relation between Heidegger and Foucault is clearly an important one, and there are certainly a number of points at which their ideas may be thought to intersect, but, until recently, the question had not been the subject of any close examination. While a number of writers had made claims concerning the relationship, mostly arguing against the idea of any significant influence, little detailed work had been done. Stuart Elden's book, Mapping the Present,³ goes a long way toward rectifying this omission. Although Elden's work is not historical or biographical in focus – he does not attempt to track particular lines of influence as these may be documented in specific references or incidents – he nevertheless develops a reading of Heidegger and Foucault that allows us to see the work of these two thinkers as standing in very close proximity – so much so that the work of the later appears as in certain significant respects to be almost a continuation, though with important differences, of the work of the other.

Elden's book comprises five chapters, of which three focus on Heidegger and two on Foucault. The discussion of Heidegger is organized along more or less chronological lines: chapter one deals with Being and Time; chapter two with the shifts in Heidegger's thinking that occur in his engagement with Hölderlin and Nietzsche; chapter three with Heidegger's essays on art and technology. The chapters on Foucault are arranged analytically rather than chronologically: chapter four takes up certain key ideas in Foucault's work, notably the ideas of archaeology and genealogy, and of limit and power, recasting them in the light of the reading of Heidegger articulated in the preceding chapters; chapter five applies the

analytical framework so developed to a number of Foucault's own writings and to his account of modern disciplinary practice within the hospital, the prison and elsewhere.

One of the most significant features of Elden's work is that it does not merely advance a particular reading of Foucault in relation to Heidegger, but also argues for the theoretical centrality of the concepts of space and place, and it is to this that the phrases in Elden's title – 'Mapping the Present' and 'the project of a spatial history' – refer us. In this respect, there are actually three elements to Elden's work: a thesis about the theoretical centrality of place and space according to which these concepts must be taken, not merely as an important focus for social and political analysis, but as the key concepts in such analysis; a reading of Heidegger and of Foucault that takes the concepts of space and or place as central to their own thinking; and an argument for there being a close connection between the thought of Heidegger and Foucault that becomes evident once the centrality of place and space is brought into view.

Although in some ways it is Foucault who is the main focus for Elden's discussion, in that it is indeed the Foucaultian idea of a 'Mapping of the Present' that give the book its title, it is Heidegger who is at the center of discussion for the largest part of the work. This is perhaps not surprising, if only because the idea that the spatial plays an important role in Foucault is already well established, if not always well-articulated or explored, in the existing literature. The importance of space and place in Heidegger's thought is not so well-recognized or understood, however, and this in spite of the ubiquity of terms and concepts relating to place and space throughout the Heideggerian corpus. Indeed, Heidegger himself referred to his thinking as an attempt to engage in a 'topology of being' ('Topologie des Seyns').⁴ One of the reasons for welcoming Elden's work is that he is one of a small, but increasing number of writers (including, notably, Ed Casey and Julian Young) who have brought this aspect of Heidegger's work to our attention.⁵

What Elden does not do in this book, however, is to provide an account of the way in which the concepts of place and space are themselves articulated as part of Heidegger's overall vision or of the way in which they connect up with other key concepts. In this respect Elden provides us more with a survey of the various appearances of these concepts in various places in Heidegger's thinking rather than working through the way in which they enter into the Heideggerian problematic as such. Thus, while Elden recognizes the way in which Heidegger engages, particularly in connection with his reading of Hölderlin, in a rethinking of issues connected with space and place, Elden says relatively little about the way in which

this relates to other shifts in Heidegger's thought. Central here, of course, is the way the re-thinking of space and place might be connected with Heidegger's move away from the transcendental framework of Being and Time towards the development of the Ereignis-thinking of the mid to late 'thirties. How might the Ereignis be thought in relation to place and space (as well as time)? Elden devotes considerable attention to the historical and to the concept of the Augenblick, how then does the historical and the temporal relate to place for Heidegger? Can the shift from Augenblick to Ereignis (if this is indeed a shift that we wish to thematise) be understood as a shift from moment to place? Similarly, when it comes to Heidegger's later thinking, to the essays on technology and the Fourfold, although the concepts of place and space loom large here, Elden offers little in the way of answers to some of the core questions: What is the relation between place and dwelling and between place and the Fourfold? To what extent is technology essentially tied up with the spatial and how does it modify the character and possibility of dwelling? What does it mean to speak of a 'Topologie des Seyns'?

In this respect, one might say that a tendency towards exegesis rather than analysis characterizes much of Elden's presentation. And while this is not in itself a shortcoming in the work, it does mean that there are certain theoretical underpinnings to Elden's argument that are simply lacking. In particular, Elden gives us very little in terms of any explanation as to why place and space should have the central theoretical role that he claims for them. For instance, while Elden asserts, following Heidegger and Foucault (and largely correctly, in my view), that "politics is inherently spatial"⁶, he does not explain, in any detailed fashion, why the spatial and the political should be so intimately bound together. Similarly, the idea of a 'spatial history' or a 'mapping of the present' is given content more through illustration derived from Foucault, and to a lesser extent, Heidegger, than by any direct theoretical explication.

The relative lack of conceptual elaboration in relation to the concepts at issue is perhaps most striking for me in relation to the way in which Elden uses the concepts of space and place in relation to one another. I have argued elsewhere⁷ that a critical step in making sense of space and place, and in giving recognition to the centrality of place, is to distinguish the different senses that attach to the notion of space and that also distinguish space from place even while the two terms are also closely related. Elden explicitly acknowledges the distinction between the concepts of space and place at various places in his discussion of Heidegger, but the distinction, which is conceptual rather than merely terminological, does

not always hold firm elsewhere in Elden's discussion and nor is the distinction much explored. Indeed, once Elden begins the discussion of Foucault, the distinction seems to lose any significance it may have had in relation to Heidegger, and space and place appear to become almost interchangeable notions. This seems to me to present a problem, not least because, when the distinction is lost, and space and place are used together, then the tendency is for space to become the dominant term and so for both space and place to be thought of in terms that prioritize the spatial rather than the localized or the topographic. Moreover, in this respect (and acknowledging the complications, indicated by Elden, that arise out of linguistic difference), it is not at all clear, on the basis of Elden's account, in what sense place, as distinct from space, is a significant concept in Foucault's work. Such a concern may be thought to be exacerbated by Foucault's own tendency to run different senses of space and place together.

There can be no doubt that, in Heidegger, the distinction between space and place plays an important and sometimes central role – although sometimes this centrality is itself problematic. Thus one might argue that one of the main difficulties in Being and Time, a difficulty that may even be thought to undermine the viability of the project as such, lies in the fact that Heidegger does not adequately separate off the different senses of spatiality at issue in the work, nor does he clearly articulate a sense of place as distinct from space. The problematic role of space and place in the early work may itself provide some of the impetus towards the developments that occur in Heidegger's thinking from 1930 onwards, and certainly, in the period after Being and Time, the concept of place (expressed by means of various Greek and German terms – most notably, topos, Ort and Ortschaft), becomes increasingly significant (as Heidegger's use of the idea of 'topology' can be seen to indicate) and is explicitly deployed in ways that set it apart from certain notions of spatiality. Elden recognizes this shift in Heidegger's thinking, and yet seems not to probe the issues at stake here in any great detail. It may be, however, that closer attention to the way in which the concepts of space and place are themselves configured might have led Elden to rethink at least one aspect of his reading of Heidegger: his critique of Heidegger's deployment of the notion of origin as "one that runs close to the idea of nostalgia".⁸

The idea of origin certainly plays an important role in many of Heidegger's discussions, but it is not, it seems to me, primarily nostalgic in character. Instead, the idea of origin refers us to the way in which the inquiry into being, which is also an inquiry into place, is always an inquiry into the origin, as

Aristotle also understood it to be, but understood in this sense, the inquiry into origin is always an inquiry into that which bounds and determines us. There is a necessary connection here between the idea of origin and the idea of place, since all appearing is bound to place and occurs in and through place. But this also means that when we refer to place here as origin we also refer to place as being – that is to being understood as the gathering/revealing that is the Ereignis itself. The turn to the origin is thus the same turn that is at issue in the Heideggerian idea of the ‘turning’ (die Kehre) that is a turning back to being. Similarly, when Heidegger talks of a ‘homecoming’, or of a ‘homeland’, it is the turn to place as origin, and so to place as being, that he refers us, and although this can always be articulated in terms of a recognition of our own belonging to specific places and spaces (a specific ‘homeland’), it has a more fundamental sense in which it involves simply the recognition of our own ‘belonging to being’ as such – a belonging that Heidegger attempts to articulate throughout his thinking whether in terms of the existential structures of Being and Time or the poetic evocations of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’. Significantly, the sense of place at issue in this connection with origin is indeed a sense of place that requires a distinction between place and space – the place at issue here may open up a space, but is not merely a space; it is the place, in the sense of the ‘locale’, even the ‘home’, of being. Understood against such a background, the idea of origin may even be said to have application to Elden’s account of Foucault. The turning back to origin that is at issue in Heidegger can be construed, in Foucaultian terms, as precisely what is involved in the mapping of the present – not a delineation of some already completed past now to be merely preserved nor in the articulation of a merely possible future to be hoped for or simply awaited, but the articulation and exploration of those places and spaces within which our own being is ordered and determined.

Elden’s own use of the term ‘mapping’ to describe the project that is at issue here is an especially appropriate one. An important element in the approaches of both Heidegger and Foucault is a rejection of reductionist tendencies – in Heidegger this is partly expressed in his critique of the metaphysical tendency to attempt always to understand being in terms of some particular being or aspect of beings; in Foucault it is evident in his insistence on the reciprocal relation between certain key concepts, for instance, of power and resistance, as well as in his understanding of power as itself a matter of a form of relational ordering rather than of the concentration of force. Reductionism (which might also be construed as identical with foundationalism) is not manifest, however, only in the attempt to reduce things to their parts, or to some

underlying 'ground'; but also in those attempts to think the temporal and the historical in terms of mere succession. To return briefly to the issue of 'origin', and to an idea already suggested in the comments above, one cannot attribute any simple nostalgia to Heidegger's talk of 'origin', since in its nostalgic form 'origin' belongs with a conception of the temporal that is tied to succession and linearity, according to which the origin at issue lies in the past, whereas Heidegger's origin is tied to a very different sense of the temporal and is to be found primarily in the present.

The idea of a 'mapping' of the present thus carries with it the idea of an investigation of the structures that determine and bound the present, and that also come to appearance only in relation to the present, and yet that cannot be understood other than as a set of interconnected elements. Just as a map shows us what is present through the relations between individual elements, so the accounts set forth by Heidegger and Foucault do likewise – they exhibit a system of interconnections rather than uncover some underlying substance or ground. Elden refers at one point to David Harvey's criticism of maps as "typically totalizing, usually two-dimensional, Cartesian and very undialectical devices"⁹ Elden defends his use of the idea of mapping against Harvey by emphasizing the importance of the spatial, but as my comments should already indicate, it seems to me that there is a more direct response available here: maps enable us to view systems of relationships without any need for reduction; moreover, contrary to Harvey's assertions, maps are never totalizing, but rather, by their very nature, they always delineate a set of features, a particular set of relations, according to the topographical framework within which they are constructed and they always do so in a way that makes particular reference to the context in which the map will be read and used.¹⁰

The mapping example suggests that sometimes Elden actually underplays his hand and that the ideas he develops may actually be more strongly based than his own presentation may allow. In this respect, I would argue that the relatively undeveloped character of 'space' and 'place' as these concepts are deployed in Elden's account, and particularly the lack of clear or consistent differentiation between those concepts, is a major source of difficulty in clarifying the real strength and significance of the ideas and arguments that Elden advances. This criticism could be seen, however, merely to reflect my own philosophical desires and predilections and my own preoccupation with the concept of place as such. Moreover, it would almost certainly be asking too much to expect Elden to deal with all of the complex of issues that are raised either by the concepts of space and place alone, or even by the role of these concepts

in the work of Heidegger and Foucault. Indeed, as I acknowledged above, Elden's work is presumably not intended to undertake the sort of extended conceptual analysis that I have indicated here. Instead it seems to me that Elden's main aim is to provide an overall reading of Heidegger that brings the spatial and topological elements in his thinking to the fore so as to enable a better appreciation of Foucault's own intellectual debt to Heidegger as well as a better understanding of the significance of the spatial and topological as these play a role in social and political analysis and in this he undoubtedly succeeds.

Mapping the Present constitutes an important contribution both to the expanding literature on space and place and to the study of Heidegger and Foucault. Indeed, it will undoubtedly provoke further discussion and debate concerning the relation between these two thinkers.

Let me close on one final small point of terminology. The pioneering West Australian writer on place, George Seddon, once noted the relative poverty of the English language when it comes to adjectives relating to place.¹¹ Elden recommends the introduction of the term 'platial' in order to remedy this situation. I applaud Elden's intent here – anyone who writes on place is constantly reminded of the difficulties in finding terms to do the job at issue here. It seems to me, however, that 'platial' simply does not fill the role terribly well, maybe because it too much resembles other unrelated terms for my liking. but maybe also because it seems worth preserving the oddity that this word 'place' has in English. 'Place' connects with many other terms that themselves allow of adjectival forms – topic, topology, topography, locale, site, home – and yet is not simply to be identified with any of them (though I have myself tended elsewhere to give some preference to topology and topological). Perhaps this should be taken as a virtue of the virtue of the English term rather than a vice, and we should both recognize the complexity it implies and make use of the distinctions and colorations it enables. On this basis, I would argue against introducing a new adjective into the language, but would instead recommend retaining place as it is, with all the complication and even the sometime awkwardness, that it presents.

¹ Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, Dream and Existence, trans. Forrest Williams and Jacob Needleman (New York: Humanities Press, 1986).

² Michel Foucault, 'The Return of Morality', in Foucault Live (Interviews 1966-84), trans. John Johnston, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p.326.

³ Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History. London, Continuum, 2001, pp.xiv, 217.

⁴ See Heidegger, 'Seminar in Le Thor 1969', in Seminare, Gesamtausgabe 15 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1986), p.344.

⁵ See Ed Casey's discussion in The Fate of Place (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), pp.243-84 and Julian Young, Heidegger's Later Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Heidegger's Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Joseph Fell's Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) was one of the first works to investigate the idea of place throughout Heidegger's work; Didier Franck's takes up the problem of spatiality in Being and Time, while Otto Pöggeler has discussed the idea of topology in Heidegger's thinking in a number of places, including 'Heidegger's Topology of Being' in Joseph Kocklemans (ed.), On Heidegger and Language (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp.107-46.

⁶ Mapping the Present, p.151.

⁷ See my Place and Experience (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.19ff.

⁸ Mapping the Present, p.67.

⁹ Quoted by Elden, Mapping the Present, p.114; from Harvey, Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.4.

¹⁰ For more on mapping and the character of map-like representations see my Place and Experience, pp.54-60.

¹¹ George Seddon, Sense of Place. A Response to an Environment: the Swan Coastal Plan, Western Australia (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1972), pp.261-2.